Beasts of the Modern Imagination

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Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, and the Problem of Mimesis

Darwin’s evolutionary theory crossed disciplinary boundaries from the moment of its publication, to exert a revolutionary impact on political theory, economics, and particularly the social histories of Marx and of the Social Darwinists. Less well known is the genealogy of Darwin’s influence in the realms of philosophy and art, where we may trace him as the author of a theory of imitation that reverses the Aristotelian aesthetic by showing life itself to be mimetic under certain conditions. Furthermore, the theory of imitation derived by Nietzsche, and subsequently Kafka, from Darwin preserves its political teleology, and therefore functions as a secular and vitalistic complement, if not alternative, to René Girard’s religious and psychological neo-Hegelian theory of imitation (see chapter 1, note 2).

If Aristotle writes in the Poetics, “Imitation is natural to mankind from childhood on: Man is differentiated from other animals because he is the most imitative of them,” 1 Darwin discovered that in the world of Nature both plants and animals “practice” mimicry or imitation in the interest of protective adaptation to ensure the survival of their species.

Insects often resemble for the sake of protection various objects, such as green or decayed leaves, dead twigs, bits of lichen, flowers, spines, excrement of birds, and living insects; but to this latter point I shall hereafter recur. The resemblance is often wonderfully close, and is not confined to colour, but extends to form, and even to the manner in which the insects hold themselves. The caterpillars which project motionless like dead twigs from the bushes on which they feed, offer an excellent instance of a resemblance of this kind. (O, 205)

The implications of this discovery are enormous: that imitation belongs to the realm of Nature rather than culture, to the inhuman as well as the human, that its practice might be organic, unconscious, and involuntary, that its teleology might be political rather than aesthetic, and that it may serve as a pivot of
historical change. These implications inform a radical revaluation of mimesis and theater in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Franz Kafka.

Working without benefit of psychology, Darwin draws analogies between natural and artificial selection that result in ascribing “creativity,” if not an actual motive, to natural selection.² Animal mimicry is therefore provided with a heuristic explanation as a mediated process serving, in protracted and statistically significant form, the ends of protection and defense. “Assuming that an insect originally happened to resemble in some degree a dead twig or a decayed leaf, and that it varied slightly in many ways, then all the variations which rendered the insect at all more like any such object, and thus favoured its escape, would be preserved, whilst other variations would be neglected and ultimately lost; or, if they rendered the insect at all less like the imitated object, they would be eliminated” (O, 205).

Nietzsche, taking the analogy between natural and artificial selection literally enough to toy with eugenics in his later writings (4: PW, 113), gives Darwin’s protective adaptation a psychological interpretation from which he draws certain political inferences. He concludes that imitation is a strategy, unconscious or conscious, organic or intellectual, serving the weak in their struggle against the strong, and that it is consequently a sufficient threat to life, passion, and power to justify a lifelong antipathy to imitation that culminated in his conflict with Wagner over the Bayreuth enterprise, but whose beginnings may be found in the attack on New Attic comedy in The Birth of Tragedy.

Kafka comes to evolutionary theory through Darwin, Haeckel, and Nietzsche, a complex and impure pedigree in which Nietzsche’s psychological, antipressive and antianthropocentric interpretation of Darwin wins out. Kafka likewise exposes the devious political ends of imitation, reenactment, and performance in several of his fictions, and in “A Report to an Academy” he directly links animal mimicry and theatrical performance as evolutionary strategies in the struggle for survival. Kafka appears to subscribe to the idiosyncratic Nietzschean elaboration of Darwinian theory by which certain organic processes (protective imitation, camouflage, adaptive behavior, morphological resemblance) and intellectual acts (deception, lying, rationalization, self-delusion) are treated as homologous and analogous. His aversion to imitation, like Nietzsche’s, seems

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to derive from insight into the ontological implications of instinctual and rational doubling.

Darwinism, "the last great scientific movement" (2, GS, 500), played a complicated part in a series of major shifts in Nietzsche's thought following The Birth of Tragedy that are difficult to localize but that together comprise what might be called Nietzsche's "scientism": the shift from the dualistic metaphysical principles of Dionysus and Apollo to the monistic will to power, from problems of aesthetics to problems of psychology, from the methodologies of philology to those of the natural sciences, and from dialectical logic to a model of mind in which rationality and consciousness are explained as forms of compensatory behavior. Nietzsche, who in Untimely Meditations deplores David Strauss's misuse of Darwin, goes on to demonstrate a better appropriation. Much preoccupied with the problem of history, he apparently returned to animal history for the same reasons Darwin turned to geology: in the hopes of finding a hermeneutical theory of development and change that would be free from the kind of historical prejudices and perspectival distortions of human self-interest he criticized in Strauss. It would seem that Nietzsche also sought in Darwinism a psychology of primitive life, of the organism's behavior prior to corruption by culture and philosophy, but exempt from the moralistic distortions of such eighteenth-century Romantic notions as Rousseau's noble savage.

The ways in which Darwinism fails to fulfill Nietzsche's need for a developmental psychology are as important as the ways in which it serves it. For example, Nietzsche accepts Darwin's description of primary instincts in economic terms at the same time that he rejects, and indeed reverses, the specific economic assumptions underlying Darwin's theory of the struggle for survival. "What concerns the famous 'struggle for survival' seems to me, for the time being, more asserted than proven. It occurs, but as an exception; the total condition of life is not the emergency, the state of hunger, but rather wealth, opulence, and even absurd waste—where one fights, one fights for power" (3, TI, 444). Nietzsche defines his own primary instinct, the will to power, as an economic opposite of the survival instinct, as a physiological will to growth, prodigality, excess (2, GS, 489; 3, BGE, 24), a will not only to life, but to more life in the sense that the organism requires not only adequate conditions for the maintenance of life but an excess of resources to enable profuse

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growth, reproduction, and a reckless expenditure of energy. He further orders these two instincts, the prodigal will to power and the conservative survival instinct, into a relationship of priority: the will to power is primary, the survival instinct secondary and derivative, in keeping with its exceptional, occasional, and contingent nature as an instinct activated only in times of want and danger and stimulated by the emotion of fear. The relationship might also be formulated by saying that the will to power and the survival instinct are offensive and defensive versions of one another, or that the survival instinct is the defensive expression of the will to power in the weak.

By placing the survival instinct in a derivative relationship to the will to power, Nietzsche is able to formulate their instinctual operation not only quantitatively, in terms of excess or dearth of power, but also directionally, a concept crucial to understanding the function of doubling in Nietzsche’s psychology. The difference between the will to power and the will to survival is not only that the former expends (an outward movement) and the latter conserves (an inward movement), but actually something far more complex, a matter of directness (appropriation) and indirectness (strategic surrender) that creates a doubling of motives (ostensible and ulterior) in the weak organism. For example, in adapting to arctic conditions, the bear no longer simply appropriates his enemies in a fight but practices a form of strategic surrender of its power that resembles a kind of deception. Instead of risking its life in battle, it survives by eluding its enemy, by appearing to be invisible, by masking itself as snow when its fur turns white. Its adaptation is organic cunning.

By retaining the defensive and reactive function of the survival instinct, Nietzsche also incorporates Darwin’s psychology of compensatory supplements into his critical model. The most important consequence of this maneuver is that it allows him to demonstrate the secondary and derivative nature of intellectual life. Nietzsche can now explain the history of consciousness as a defensive adaptation that requires a series of supplements to compensate for an original lack of power. Consciousness is a function of the herd instinct and follows human socialization. The increased dependency of individuals on the herd makes communication necessary, and Nietzsche postulates that consciousness, particularly self-consciousness, was originally required to enable communication. “That our actions, thoughts, feelings, and movements become conscious to us—or at least partially so—is the consequence of a terrible compulsion that

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has long governed the human being: as the most endangered animal, he *required* help and protection, he needed his own kind, he needed to express his distress and to know how to make himself understood. For this he first needed ‘consciousness,’ in order to ‘know’ what is wrong with him, to ‘know’ how he feels and what he thinks” (2, *GS*, 494). Because it is a form of Darwinian adaptation, this evolution of consciousness does not signify progress or improvement of the species to Nietzsche. Rather, it is a symptom of the decadence of the organism that accompanies the transition from feral existence to domestic society, for it functions as the epistemological *ersatz* for the repressed and atrophied animal instincts.

What happened to these animalistic creatures, happily adapted to the wild, to warfare, to roving and adventure, is no different from the probable fate of aquatic animals when they were forced to become land animals or face extinction: all at once their instincts became devalued and “unhinged.” . . . They felt too awkward for the simplest tasks, they lacked in this new, unknown world the guidance of their old unconscious, self-regulating, safety-oriented drives. They were reduced to thinking, drawing inferences, calculating, deducing from cause and effect—to depending on their “consciousness,” their frailest and most fallible organ! (3, *GM*, 270)

Darwin’s deconstruction of organic morphology—when, by inferring extinct and theoretically possible forms from traces (fossils) and differences (variations), he showed that existing organic forms are neither eternal nor inevitable—suggested to Nietzsche a way of challenging the privileged forms of intellectual life. For example, Western logic may owe its status as providing normative principles of reasoning to its heuristic value rather than to its intrinsic validity. “Countless creatures that made inferences in a way different from ours became extinct; still, their reasoning may have been truer” (2, *GS*, 392).

Nietzsche eventually elaborated Darwin’s compensatory psychology into a hermeneutical tool that anticipates several of the salient features of Freudian psychoanalysis. Freudian interpretation, like the Darwinian, explores developmental histories in which defensive strategies determine new forms of the self that embody the traces of their weakness in the symptomatic form of their adaptation. Freud’s description of the symptom as a substitution unspecified as to form allows for various manifestations including the somatic (the hysterically affected organ), the behavioral (the obsessive ritual), and the ideological (delusion).

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The supplement in Nietzsche can likewise take all of these forms, and it is this play of substitutions that allows him to apply his critical model to the study of disparate historical phenomena: philosophical, political, social, intellectual, and even zoological.

Paul Ricoeur rightly lists Nietzsche with Freud and Marx as thinkers whose interpretation is an exercise in suspicion. Nietzsche's suspicion is directed toward any evidence of mediated desire. Only the unmediated behavior of simple appropriation, for example, the predation of wild animals, the militarism of Caesar and Napoleon, the rapacity of the Borgias, is beyond suspicion and critique. Nietzsche's will to power therefore approximates Hegel's animal desire rather than the condition of the Master precisely because it lacks self-consciousness. Nietzsche's Masters require no recognition. The "great style" of the monumental architectures in their honor (presumably Roman, French Empire, and Italian Renaissance) represent "power that no longer requires proof, that disdains to ingratiate itself . . . that feels no witnesses around it and lives without consciousness of contradiction; that reposes within itself, fatally, a law among laws" (3, Tl, 443). The French Romantics, in contrast, fired by the ressentiment ("Pobel-Ambition") of the Slave, camouflage their iconoclastic aims to destroy the ruling class with a beautiful style that deliberately imitates their aristocratic betters in expression and sensibility (3, Tl, 439).

Nietzsche's theory of development and change yields consistent results even when applied to objects as different from Freud's and Darwin's as biography, intellectual genealogies, and political histories. In every pathological development he finds the same structure: a power differential, an ulterior motive, the compensatory function of a supplement, and a mimetic adaptation. For example, Socratic reason is born when Socrates, an ugly, low-born Greek, acting from motives of ressentiment, is able to persuade his aristocratic betters to adopt mimetically his own exaltation of reason over instinct. Nietzsche critiques Greek rationalism by arguing that it was not a spontaneous, progressive development, but the result of a clever trick prompted by Socrates' personal ulterior motives: his desire to overcome the disadvantage of his lack of beauty (by exalting mind over body) and his plebeian status (dialectical inquiry levels the aristocrat's advantage by making the opponent prove he is not a fool). The Athenians succumb to the ploy because, suffering from a surcharge of strength, a dangerous anarchy of the instincts, they require the Socratic pharmakos to save them from self-

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destruction. Nietzsche recognizes the paradoxical therapeutic value of this supplement: it is a medicine of equivocal power, both cure and poison, cure by poison, saving the Greeks from their self-destructive strength by enervating and sickening them. In imitating the rationalism of Socrates, the Athenians practice the strategic surrender of their passions in the interest of a life-preserving, if costly, adaptation (3, T1, 397–402).

Using his Darwinian model, Nietzsche is able to encompass Christianity, democratic socialism, and French Romanticism in a continuous critique ("Continuation of Christianity in the French Revolution" [4, PW, 23]) that interprets their libertarian, fraternal, and egalitarian ideals as signs of the supplement in the service of political strategy: "justice" as the demand for concessions from the powerful, "freedom" as the desire for disengagement from the powerful, "equal rights" as the restriction of the acquisition of power among one's peers (4, PW, 116). Nietzsche even insists on the political teleology of Romantic emotionalism, regarding the cultivation of feeling and sympathy as polemical rather than aesthetic in purpose since it results in portrayals of suffering that stimulate pity for the weak: the misfit in Hugo, the woman in Rousseau, the slave in Harriet Beecher Stowe (4, PW, 23; 121; 166).

By treating their ideologies as purely supplemental functions, survival strategies in the form of compensatory substitutions, Nietzsche is able to evaluate cultural phenomena in terms of their evolutionary effects. He is therefore able to describe the result of Christian morality, which in his view historically destroyed the natural aristocracy of the noble Roman ruling class by leveling hierarchies with its fraternal and altruistic ideals, in genetic terms, as a kind of mongrelization or creation of "mishmash-people" (3, T1, 425–28; BGE, 132), as he calls them. His diagnosis of the modern spirit reveals a symptomatic set of moral vanities concealing the unfitness that is the heritage of centuries of bad breeding and hybridization: "tolerance" as the inability to say yes or no to an issue, "great sympathy" as a combination of indifference, curiosity, and excitability, "objectivity" as lack of character, personality, and the ability to love, "passion" as a screen for disorder and intemperance, and so forth (4, PW, 108). Nietzsche's most extreme remedy for this genetic chaos is to combat the detrimental effects of Christian Zähmung (domestication) with Darwinian Zucht (eugenics), since only artificial breeding can circumvent the deleterious effects of adaptation in natural evolution. "Not only a Master

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Race whose duty is limited to ruling: but a race with a singular sphere of life, with a surplus of strength for beauty, bravery, culture, manners, to a most spiritual degree; a yea-saying race that may grant itself every great luxury; strong enough to dispense with the tyranny of the virtue-imperative, rich enough to dispense with thrift and pedantry, beyond good and evil; a hot-house of exotic and select plants” (4, PW, 113).

By exploring at such length the function of supplementarity in Nietzsche’s thinking, I hoped to situate it as the mediating term between Nietzsche’s primary (will to power) and secondary (will to survive) instincts, and to suggest thereby its ultimately Darwinian origin and political nature. My aim was to establish the supplementary nature of mimesis, to depict it as the repetition of an absence rather than a presence, which appears not spontaneously, prompted by pleasure, as Aristotle suggests, but in response to the danger of a lack, a need, or a threat. Mimesis has for Nietzsche a political function irrespective of context (history, philosophy, art, religion), a fact that allows him to conceptualize nonaesthetic phenomena in terms of dramatic structure.

He describes morality, for example, as “consequence, symptom, mask, tartufferie, disease, misunderstanding” (3, GM, 214). Because it is a supplement, a substitute for a deficiency, morality is overdetermined (as Freudian symptoms, the return of the repressed, are overdetermined). Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* is a tracing back of morality to its repressed origins in health and power differentials and in somatic and affective conditions. Morality as *Tartüfferie*, however, catches up in a single word the entire drama of that particular religious hypocrisy in which prudery masks prurience and exerts its tyranny over the healthy and strong. Nietzsche likewise perceives in the doubling of sacred and erotic imagery in Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ* a kind of spiritual striptease that makes him sniff contemptuously, “This mystic has a manner of discoursing on love that could arouse the curiosity of the *parisiennes*” (3, TI, 438). Nietzsche is sensitive to the hypocrisies that mask the libidinization of thought, the ostensibly rational dialogue concealing the sublimated homosexual agon of the beautiful Greek youths under Socrates’ tutelage, or the purity of French neoclassical art, infused with the erotic energy of heterosexual competition (3, TI, 400; 450).

Nietzsche’s aversion to mimesis, his dislike and fear of masks, theater, mime, and particularly the dangerous concept of the ‘artiste’” (2, GS, 508), spring from the Darwinian form of their

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supplementarity. Nietzsche feared above all the effects of natural selection by which both a tendency to mimicry and the illusion or appearance, the mimetic trick expedient for survival, become genetically incorporated into the living organism as a "surplus of adaptive capacities of all kinds that is no longer satisfied in the service of the most immediate and specific utility." Nietzsche's passage describing the genesis of the mimetic "instinct" deserves to be quoted in full because its language betrays both the Darwinian process and the political teleology Nietzsche attributed to imitation.

Such an instinct will easily have reached its greatest sophistication among families of the lower classes, who must survive under changing pressures and compulsions, in deep dependency, and who must, with suppleness, adapt to their blankets, continually adjusting to new circumstances, adopting new postures and expressions, until by degrees they become able to turn their coats with every wind and thereby virtually to become a coat, as masters of the incorporated and incarnated art of the eternal game of hide-and-seek that is called mimicry in animals—until ultimately this capacity, accumulated from generation to generation, becomes dominant, unreasonable, uncontrollable, an instinct learned to lord it over other instincts, and which generates the actor and "the artist." (2, GS, 508)

Interestingly, Nietzsche's first adverse response to mimicry is to the New Attic comedy of Euripides, which is also, in his view, the first mimetic drama. Although his excoriation is found in the early Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche objects to New Attic comedy on much the same political and Darwinian grounds that preoccupy him in his late writings: Euripides caters to the audience, "a power whose strength is only in numbers" (1, BT, 67), and he teaches survival skills—Socratic survival skills, at that—to the common man, to any spectator who wishes to imitate his revolutionary dialectical discourse.

This was not the only pleasure: one even learned to speak from Euripides, as he himself boasted in the competition with Aeschylus: how people learned from him now to observe artfully and with sly sophistication, to conduct transactions and draw inferences. . . . And so the Aristophanic Euripides justifies his prize by noting how he represented common, familiar, everyday life and activity, which everyone is capable of judging. If the masses now philosophize, govern their land and estates with amazing shrewdness, and conduct their own tri-
Another symptom of supplementarity in New Attic comedy is found in its realism, its imitation of the actual life, which makes drama self-conscious: acted rather than lived in the body. Unlike the older, nonmimetic forms of Greek drama that were rooted in the living experience of the Dionysian Rausch, the festival, the dithyrambic music, the plays of Euripides reenact or counterfeit passion. If one believes Nietzsche’s own urgent accounts, it was a similar substitution of living music by theatrical production that occasioned the rift in his friendship with Wagner.

The most pervasive theories of the Nietzsche / Wagner split assume that because their estrangement coincided with Wagner’s rise to fame and power, Nietzsche succumbed to resentment. But Nietzsche’s own repeated asseverations of the purely professional nature of his attack suggest different interpretations for the significance of the timing: for example, that Wagner’s move from Tribschen to Bayreuth marked a shift both in his art (from music in the salon to opera on the stage) and in his politics (from “French” Wagner to “German” Wagner, from unconventional free spirit to paragon of Reich idealism).

Wagner becomes a case for Nietzsche’s evolving theory of aesthetics that began as a “metaphysics of art” in The Birth of Tragedy and ended in the physiologism of Nietzsche Contra Wagner (“Aesthetics is, after all, nothing but applied physiology” [3, NCW, 487]) and whose constant aim is the deconstruction of aesthetic idealism. Beauty is to Nietzsche a fiction, an anthropomorphism—whether the “beautiful soul” or the “golden mean” of Greek aesthetics, or the concept of Das Schöne an sich (3, TI, 447)—that results from misunderstanding that the physiological nature of one’s aesthetic response depends on the somatic and affective condition of the subject. To Nietzsche the perception of beauty is an instinctive response to health, vigor, and richness of life. The sense of ugliness is a response to physical degeneration and decay. This aesthetic formulation allows Nietzsche to appropriate art as a function of the will to power, an aphrodisiac, a stimulant to life, an excitation of the overall affect system akin to Freud’s infantile polymorphously perverse sexuality.

To Nietzsche the transition from hearing Wagner’s music to seeing Wagnerian opera performed at the Festspielhaus illustrated perfectly the logic of his antipathy to imitation: that in

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the theatrical spectacle an ideological supplement intervenes that politicizes the art. Onstage, Wagner’s music loses its physiological effect, a kind of natural lubrication of the organism’s animal functions, and becomes subjugated to the dramatic effect of manipulating the conscious audience response, namely, “to intoxicate the audience and impel it to a moment of powerful and lofty feeling” (2, GS, 360). Music is transformed from a private physiological experience into a political herd experience, and that life it once stimulated in the body is replaced by a factitious opinion or attitude of mind. “One becomes one’s neighbor” (3, NCW, 488), Nietzsche remarks of the applauding Wagnerian spectator, in a comment that anticipates Heidegger’s critique of otherness in Sein und Zeit. Nietzsche’s own response to the first Bayreuth season was dramatically somatic: he became physically ill. “Doesn’t my stomach also protest? My heart? My circulation? Aren’t my bowels afflicted?” (3, NCW, 487).

Nietzsche claimed that he noticed no actual change in Wagner until he received the folio of Parsifal; but as early as the first season Wagner was rendered unrecognizable by the propaganda of his followers. The triumph of “attitude” and “heroic posture” onstage was imitated in life. Wagner fell victim to Darwinian camouflage: he became his own “coat,” his own media image and reputation. Nietzsche had described this genetic transmutation earlier when he wrote, “The reputation, name, and appearance . . . thrown over things like a garment and entirely foreign to their nature and even to their skin, grows from generation to generation merely because people believe in it, until it gradually, so to speak, accretes and assimilates to a thing and turns into its very body” (2, GS, 352). Yet Nietzsche never made the most obvious charge consistent with this Darwinian formulation of Wagner’s transformation: that Wagner sold out to secure the much needed patronage of the Bavarian king. But in light of Nietzsche’s antipathy, Wagner’s shift of loyalties certainly is ironic: from the music-loving Nietzsche to the idealistic, drama-loving, and mimetic Ludwig II, who elaborately reproduced Wagnerian motifs in the histrionic visual and architectonic forms of his castles (the Wagner rooms at Neuschwanstein, or the grotto at Linderhof, for example).

Nietzsche distinguishes the “French” from the “German” Wagner not only by the replacement of Cosima’s influence with that of the Bayreuth idealists, but also by degree of pathology or decadence (3, EH, 592–97). He saw the earlier Wagner sharing with the French late Romantics (Delacroix, Berlioz, Baudelaire)
the voluptuous overrefinement of the senses that manifests itself in a feel for nuance and a fanatical concern with virtuosity of expression. Even the sweet, seductive Tristan of this phase already betrayed the unwholesomeness of life attenuated by this self-conscious preoccupation with the conveyance of feeling. But if the "French" Wagnerian music is morbid, the "German" is macabre. The heroic operas use the unliving figments of the mental world (illusions, virtues, nationalism) to mimic life, and it is not surprising that Nietzsche applied to Wagner's Bayreuth disciples metaphors of pickling and taxidermy, describing them as stuffed trophies or specimens labelled Geist, a travesty of life (3, EH, 565). Nietzsche sees Geist (spirit, mind, intellect) in all forms of decadent behavior reflecting enervation of the instincts and deception: prudence, patience, cunning, dissimulation, self-control, and mimicry (3, TI, 445).

Before turning now to Kafka's "Report to an Academy," one more example of the Darwinian and political function of acting as adaptive, compensatory behavior, which illustrates the entire psychology, may be helpful. According to Nietzsche's formulation, the poor, Jews, and women are "natural" actors and role players (2, GS, 509), whose degeneration may be explained in this way. To Nietzsche the perfect woman (not to be confused with the "ideal" woman) is the maenad, the bacchante, whose will to power flows unrestrained until it culminates in the orgiastic moment of sparagmos in the Dionysian rite. Since for the woman the will to power as growth, prodigality, and fecundity takes the form of procreation, she must appropriate the male to achieve her fertilization. The result is the battle of the sexes, a deadly, instinctual power struggle waged maniacally and ruthlessly by the woman with the aim of using (and merely using) the man to produce the child that is her effusion of power (3, EH, 550–51). But the woman who is weak and who stands to be vanquished in the fight does not recklessly squander the last of her diminished powers in a brilliant and doomed last stand. Instead of submitting to the patriarchal marriage, which is founded not on superficial and transient feelings of romantic love but on the power instincts of the male (the sexual instinct, the property instinct, the mastery instinct), she resorts to political and ideological supplements for survival. Joining the herd, she calls for suffrage ("cattle voting rights"), and sublimates her sexual lack in the fictive ideals of the "'woman-in-herself,' 'higher woman,' 'idealist woman'" (3, EH, 551–52). She resembles and pretends—cunning, treacherous, and dangerous—

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and in fits of ghastly mimicry she even masquerades as a man by wearing trousers, like the notorious George Sand (3, Tl, 440).

Whether Kafka intended his “Report to an Academy” to satirize Jewish adaptation by conversion, as William Rubinstein suggests, or whether it was written as a reverse “Metamorphosis,” the story exhibits the hallmark of Nietzsche’s Darwinian antipathy to imitation. Kafka might, of course, have borrowed the story’s central conceit, the ape’s accelerated evolution by “aping” the human, directly from his own youthful study of Darwin. Nietzsche’s influence, however, is clearly stamped on the witty twist by which Kafka makes the ape’s mimicry intellectual rather than biological. “The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the individual, develops its chief powers in disimulation,” writes Nietzsche (3, Truth, 1018).

If his friendship with Jizchak Löwy and the Yiddish theater troupe at the Savoy stimulated Kafka’s interest in drama, it did not turn him into a playwright. Instead, Kafka assimilates drama into the themes and structure of his fiction until the philosophical center of many of his stories is situated in the performance (although performance encompasses a variety of exhibitions and accomplishments) and in the narration, which becomes dramatic monologue and narration in his later stories.

Performance and narration often form a pair that is either self-contradictory or mimetic. “The Great Wall of China” and “The Burrow” both open with a sentence that displays a successful architectural achievement: “The Great Wall of China was finished off at its northernmost point” and “I have completed and furnished my burrow and it seems to be successful.” The narrator then introduces an incremental series of qualifications (the Great Wall has lacunae; the burrow is vulnerable) that amount to a contradiction by stories’ end. Kafka’s “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk” is both self-contradictory and mimetic. The story begins with the acclamation, “Our singer is named Josefine. Whoever has not heard her does not know the power of song” (172). The narration then proceeds to enact or imitate what it describes. It diminishes Josefine’s reputation, by gradually stripping her of all distinction, as it describes the diminution of her song, which becomes shorter, weaker, less elaborate, and, finally, silent. The narration retracts itself like a rug that is being rolled out at one end while it is being rolled up at the other. By story’s end the opening sentence has been negated, Josefine has disappeared, her song is a memory, and to obliterate her memory the story has to cancel or erase itself, which it does by narrat-
ing that the mice practice neither music nor history. The narration is only a trace.

The Kafkaesque performance always results in death or madness or effacement of some sort, a clue to its mediative position in a power conflict. The hunger artist and the officer in the penal colony both perform for their lives (both fast and execution are conducted as theatrical "shows") in an effort to convince those in power, the indifferent audience and the new regime, of their effectiveness. The narration of Josefine is a performance, a performance of historical narration in competition with Josefine's musical performance, a competition the narrator can win only by losing. Both "The Great Wall of China" and "The Burrow" are defensive narratives about defensive constructions. Narration and performance in Kafka's stories serve political functions in a setting of Darwinian competition. The stake is survival.

Kafka's "Report to an Academy" is his most pointed illustration of the Darwinian political teleology of the mimetic performance. The three types of performance given by the ape (the imitation of the sailors on shipboard, his variety show act, and the report to the academy, which is the narration itself) are arranged in successive stages of dissimulation. While they are all acts of mimicry, the first betrays its adaptive and defensive purpose most bluntly while the tour de force of the scientific performance conceals it most expertly. In extant fragments of early versions of the story the narrative frame is a provincial admirer's interview of Rotpeter, a device structurally reminiscent of the explorer's interview of the officer in "In the Penal Colony." Kafka clearly shifted the narration to Rotpeter and gave it the form of the dramatic monologue in order to make the narration a mimetic doubling of the earlier performances. By shifting the frame to the arena of science, the Darwinian role reversal, the ape as guest lecturer on evolution, also serves as evidence of the ultimate, if degrading, effectiveness of adaptive behavior.

In contrast to the non sequitur of Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis, Rotpeter's evolution emerges from the cultural consequences of Darwinism, which aroused European curiosity in exotic fauna, and particularly in marginal and transitional species, the "thinking" and "talking" animals and feral humans displayed in travelling circuses and menageries at the turn of the century. Hagenbeck, the company that captures Rotpeter, was, in historical fact, conducting extensive collecting expeditions from Hamburg at that time. However, the repressed element of this phenomenon (repressed because it becomes visible only

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from the animal's perspective) is that the ostensibly philosophical and scientific interest in exotic creatures not only justified the brutal techniques of capture and taming but also concealed a hidden competitiveness, an ontological insecurity that turned the intersubjective relationship of captor and captive, viewer and exhibit, scientist and specimen, into a covert power struggle.

Although the members of the academy never appear in Kafka's story except as implied listeners (''Exalted gentlemen of the academy!''') their competitive presence may be inferred from the defensive maneuvers Rotpeter executes in his report. He achieves a number of significant role reversals when, at the outset, he shifts the topic of his report from the story of his ape life (requested by the academy) to that of his progressive evolution from ape to man. This allows him to shift from object to subject by identifying himself firmly with the members of the academy in opposition to the animal "other": "Your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as you have something of this sort behind you, cannot be farther from you than it is from me" (RA, 148). Conversely, by focusing attention on the barbaric methods of his humanization and civilization, he makes human behavior the specimen, the inexplicable object of his study. His report thereby functions as a verbal imitation of the gesture deplored by the press as rude and uncivilized: he lets down his trousers. And although Rotpeter accuses the offended reporter of not being able to tell the difference between showing one's scar and showing one's ass, he manages to get away with doing both. In his report to the academy, the ape triumphs over violence by concealing his submission to its continued victimization, that is, he acts as the successfully adaptive Darwinian organism.

Rotpeter's defensive behavior serves also as a symptom of the tremendous risks incurred in making his report. His narrative reveals explicitly the power differential between humans and apes: apes are consigned to boxes and cages unless they can convince their captors that they are human. Rotpeter's report to the academy therefore differs neither in form nor in purpose from his earlier performances before the sailors or on the variety stage. When he tells his listeners in a shocking parenthesis that he has since drunk many a bottle of good wine with the leaders of the Hagenbeck expedition who shot and captured him, we may infer that this gesture is less a symptom of his new "human" equanimity than a chilling repetition of an earlier mimetic act, when he was forced to drink the hated schnapps with the sailors in order to survive. Rotpeter is still imitating

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humans for his life. He admits his vulnerability in the guise of a boast when he tells his listeners, "Even so I could certainly hardly tell you even these trivial things, were I not perfectly sure of myself, and had I not unshakeably secured my position on all the great variety stages of the civilized world" (RA, 148). The imperious postures he strikes in his dealings with his underlings (his subjugated chimpanzee mate and his servile manager) are less symptomatic of his human ascendancy than of his continued need to camouflage himself as a master.

Because Rotpeter's adaptation functions as a paradigm for human evolution, Kafka carefully introduces a convincing transitional etiology for camouflage and mimicry into the story. He rejects Aristotle's autotelic motive (imitation as intrinsically pleasurable) on the one hand, and such anthropomorphic motives as idolatry and ressentiment, on the other. "I repeat: there was no allure in imitating humans; I imitated them to find a way out, and for no other reason" (RA, 153). In Nietzsche's protoexistential ethic, the ape's other alternatives to finding "a way out," either submitting to captivity and domestication or attempting suicidal flight, would have been more acceptable "weak" and "strong" responses, respectively. But Kafka had the ape choose adaptation precisely to demonstrate Nietzsche's pessimistic Darwinism: that the genesis of reason in human evolution signifies not progress but decadence. Becoming human, the sapiens acquired by the ape takes the form of wily intelligence, an originally "doubled" rationality, a linguistic and rhetorical (rather than integumentary) camouflage.

In a mimetic gesture learned from his masters ("The first thing I learned was the handshake" [RA, 148]), the ape perjures himself at the outset by pledging openness and candor to the academy. Indeed, he will deliver to them what passes for honesty or "truth" among humans: imitable gestures like the handshake itself. But for the ape, as for Kafka, truth appears to be defined precisely as that which is inimitable, namely, physical pain. "Seen from a primitive point of view, the only real, incontestable truth, undistorted by external factors (martyrdom, sacrifice for another human being) is corporal pain." Only traces of this truth (the ape's pain) remain in the form of the scars on cheek and thigh, and their exhibition in the face of modesty ("Everything lies open and above board; nothing is to be concealed; when it comes to truth, every highminded person discards even the finest manners" [RA, 149]) costs the ape the censorship of the fastidious reporter. According to Nietzsche,
pain inaugurates memory, reason, and defensive duplicity in the human animal. The ape’s animal past may therefore be engulfed in amnesia precisely because it was happy, while the painful experiences of his capture are simultaneously remembered and cleverly dissembled to avoid further pain. “Without question, the actual effect of punishment must be sought in the sharpening of wits, in the improvement of memory, in a desire to proceed henceforth more carefully, suspiciously, and secretly, in the recognition that one is ultimately too weak for many things, in a kind of improved self-judgment” (3, GM, 270).

The ape’s narration exhibits these effects in the use of an impressive repertoire of rhetorical strategies designed to serve a series of overdetermined functions. The ape will have his cake and eat it too. From his masters he has learned how to use “doubled” language to reveal and conceal, affirm and deny, flatter and denigrate, all at once. For example, he can deny, yet affirm, the violence done to him by describing it in purely mechanical terms with all reference to sensation, emotion, or intention deleted: “the site of entry of that shot” (RA, 149), “pressed my thumb into the bowl of the pipe” (RA, 152), “held the burning pipe to my fur, until it began to smolder” (RA, 153). Referring to his scar, he turns the focus from the act of aggression to the act of reportage, emphasizing his own punctilio and sang-froid in describing the infliction of the wound: “the scar caused by—let us choose a specific word for a specific purpose, to avoid being misunderstood—the scar caused by a wanton shot” (RA, 149).

This device is part of a larger strategy of shifting indignation from the attack on his body to attacks on his pride, a form of indignation more acceptable in an artiste with “the average education of a European” (RA, 154). Rotpeter therefore forgives or exonerates the tormenting sailors, whose brutishness he softens (“They are good people, in spite of everything.... Their jests were coarse, but hearty.... Their laughter was always mixed with a menacing, but ultimately harmless, cough” [RA, 150–51]), and whose cruelties he overlooks (they clearly give him the lit pipe in hopes that he will burn himself), neutralizes (he points out that the sailor both ignites and extinguishes the fire on his fur) or inflates with philosophical motives (“He wanted to solve the enigma of my being” [152]). His rage is vented instead on the journalist who wounds his vanity as a human (by imputing a residual bestiality to the ape) and toward whom he adopts a punitive posture that mimics his own oppressors. “That fellow

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should have every little finger of his writing hand blasted away, one by one” (RA, 149). Using a similar series of displacements, he shifts his outrage from the pain and disfigurement of the wound that scars his face to the name it earned him, Rotpeter, Red Peter. The shift preserves a certain logic insofar as the name signifies him as a victim of both physical and psychological imperialism (scarred \textit{and} named by the human), a logic he nonetheless undercuts by deploring the name as a blow to his “human” vanity in insufficiently distinguishing him from another performing ape. Identifying himself with the human, he prefers to publicize an injured sensibility over an injured body, a name in bad taste over a shot in the face.

As part of Rotpeter’s devious strategy of narrating his victimization as a triumph, he resorts to a technique of appropriating violence to art and science, that is, to culture and reason. The technique depends on covertly inflating and deflating the same event. For example, he begins by describing his evolution as the successful advancement of an artistic protégé by dedicated impresarios, “part-ways accompanied by superb people, advice, applause, and orchestral music” (RA, 147). His later shipboard narrative retains the shape of the artistic experience: the “training” in schnapps drinking with theory and praxis, the festive debut before officer and men to the tune of the gramophone “orchestral music,” the triumphant gesture of flinging away the empty bottle “no longer as one in despair, but as an artist” (RA, 153). At the same time, it decodes the “superb people” as the brutish sailors—slow, dumb, spitting, grunting, smoking, guzzling, guffawing—their good advice as their teasing and goading, and their applause as their sadistic approval of his fear, confusion, and pain. Rotpeter manipulates the audience by means of an ambiguity inherent in the artistic performance: apes imitating humans (Rotpeter’s act) and humans imitating apes (the arboreal swinging of the trapeze artists) represent both trained artists and disciplined animals. If he chooses to tell his story of the taming of the beast as a portrait of the artist, it is to achieve a complex set of aims. He can indict humans for cruelty without offending them by supplying them with the cultural and rational motives consistent with the self-congratulatory vanity that allowed post-Darwinian man to consider himself the pinnacle of creation. At the same time he transforms himself from mistreated animal to disciplined artist merely by bartering pity for applause.

The ape’s initial artistic achievement finally consists of imitat-
ing humans as animalistic and passionate creatures, that is, their spitting, smoking, drinking, and rubbing their bellies with gratification, a set of behavioral gestures only arbitrarily distinguished from the ape's own scratching, flea hunting, coconut licking, or head banging. Clearly, then, the ape's performance before the scientific academy requires a performance different in kind, not just in degree. Specifically, in order to qualify as a scientific report, Rotpeter's narration must imitate the human as a rational, objective, analytical creature capable of suppressing passion, emotion, desire, and self-interest. He consequently analyzes his civilizing process in terms of its effectiveness, even concluding his description of his cruel confinement in the crushing box by explaining, "One considers such confinement of wild animals in the beginning to have advantages, and today, after my experience, I cannot deny that from the human point of view this is actually the case" (RA, 149). He assumes here the ultimately sadistic posture of the scientist who rationalizes a deliberate apathy toward the pain and suffering of his experimental animals by subordinating it to a higher purpose. The ape further aggrandizes himself by attributing his progress to the development of scientific and rational powers of mind, rather than to a survival instinct, that is, the powers of objectivity (the inward calm he learns from the sailors), his powers of observation, and his skill at inductive modes of reasoning.

The report to the academy is the most brilliant of the ape's mimetic performances, for it is theater in which the violence is rational, and it consists in its own negation of violence. The ape's suave, eloquent disavowal of his own pain and suffering is the mimetic posture of the trained animal subjected to portraying both the sadist and the masochist according to Deleuze's characterization of those postures (see chapter 5). The ape mimics the rational violence of the sadist when he negates his victim's pain with the language of objectivity, apathy, and with the patently fraudulent rhetoric of the scientific demonstration. He mimics the aesthetic violence of the masochist when he situates his pain in the context of art, and he disavows his own role in the theatrical performance of the scientist. "Furthermore, I desire no one's judgment; I wish only to disperse knowledge; I only report, to you too, exalted gentleman of the academy, I have only reported" (RA, 155).

This scholarly pose is merely another version (with rational and rhetorical rather than behavioral and gestural tricks) of Rotpeter's variety stage act. But how does its theatrical nature manifest itself

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in the narration? By a lapsus, a wince, an almost involuntary betrayal. "By day I do not want to see her," he says of his chimpanzee mate, "for she has the madness of the bewildered tamed animal in her eye; only I recognize it, and I cannot bear it" (RA, 154). This admission attests to an identification that gives us a glimpse at a mask behind the mask: Rotpeter is to the academy as the chimpanzee is to him. Does he flinch because he identifies with her as victim or because he recognizes himself as her victimizer? Either way, his reaction contains an important lesson: to wince is to look away. If his audience flinches, they will not see him and he will fail as a performer and lose his Ausweg, his way out. He must therefore not only camouflage himself as a nonvictim (by concealing his own insane, bewildered look in the aforementioned ways) but he must also camouflage his audience as nonvictimizers in his imitation of them.

Ultimately, the ape’s report to the academy is classical theater insofar as it is a performance that pretends not to be a performance, that "forgets" the stage and, to use Derrida’s formulation, functions as "a mark of cancellation that lets what it covers be read." Kafka further creates a "reversion of texts" by manipulating his readers’ response to the narration, to imitate the academy’s putative response to the report. Like the academy, we interpret the narration as opaque rather than transparent (we fail to "see through" it) and we practice suspension of disbelief toward the performance. Allegorical readings of Kafka ("Kafka, like Swift, implies that man is a beast") interpret the ape as representing man, as symbolizing man, but not as imitating man. The distinction is crucial because, by attributing a textual strategy to the author but not to the ape, we fall into the anthropocentric trap prepared for us.

Kafka’s philosophical aim is to devalue and depri lify reason, an enterprise that places him in the critical tradition of Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. He shares with them the conviction that historical change, in nations, individuals, ideas, or species, is propelled by neither intellect nor imagination, but by physiological and psychological necessity. Reason and art play brilliant but mediated roles in this process by virtue of their instrumentality, their tendency to be used in the production of signification, and, particularly, of multiple signification, of "doubled" talk, of lies, and illusions. Kafka engages the reader’s interpretive abilities to make the acute point that the human reader can claim to be truly sapiens only when he recognizes that he has been outwitted by an ape using his own most cherished attributes.